

The Story of Al Capone



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Born to Italian immigrant parents (an impoverished barber and seamstress) in Brooklyn, New York, in 1899, Al Capone quit school after the sixth grade and associated with a notorious street gang, becoming accepted as a member. Johnny Torrio was the street gang leader and among the other members was Lucky Luciano, who would later attain his own notoriety.

Capone was known as "Scarface" because when he was about 20, living in Brooklyn, his left cheek was slashed in a fight. An undersized but hot-tempered Sicilian neighbor, after having been bullied by Capone, backed Al into the corner of a barbershop and slashed him twice with a razor.

In 1910 John Torrio left Brooklyn to try his evil wiles in Chicago. About 1920, at Torrio's invitation, Capone joined Torrio in Chicago, where he had become an influential lieutenant in the Colosimo mob. The rackets spawned by enactment of the Prohibition

Amendment—illegal brewing, distilling and distribution of beer and liquor—were viewed as “growth industries.”

Torrio needed more men, tough men. He sent for Capone, and Al took the next train to Chicago. Torrio, abetted by Capone, intended to take full advantage of the “growth industry” opportunities. The mob also developed interests in legitimate businesses in the cleaning and dyeing field and cultivated influence with receptive public officials, labor unions, and employees’ associations.

Torrio and Capone also served as protectors of Big Jim Colosimo, then overlord of Chicago vice, who was operating a system of saloons and houses of prostitution in Chicago’s old Levee, or Tenderloin. The new bodyguards were shrewd, quiet and hard.

Their immediate task was to attend to a young man named Vincenzo Cosmano, a killer, who had notified Jim Colosimo that he wanted \$5,000 left at a certain place at a certain time. They attended to him. Before Cosmano had time to get to the place, he was resting in a hospital nursing some bullet holes. They made the arrangements and Jim did the shooting; there was plenty of it.

Torrio was dapper, cold and efficient. Capone was but twenty-one years old, stocky, fearless and ready to take directions, wherever they led him.

Prohibition was just settling down into a systematized and deadly joke. Torrio and Capone got the drift of what it would mean to fellows who were tough and willing to take a chance and, with a real organization

behind them, were soon launched into the new super-graft.

Colosimo had the power to get things done and his two new aids could out-think him on any subject. With the trio working in unison the stature of Big Jim grew apace.

Gaudy restaurants replaced the saloons of the old Colosimo chain. The business was now a syndicate with the cabaret slant added to the old vice tie-up. Costly booze, cover charge, increased "class" and multiplied income developed.

Just as the new organization was swinging the astounding new racket for money such as all the gambling, vice and saloon interests of the old days had never produced, Big Jim Colosimo, involved in a romance, was shot to death in the door of his own restaurant, the most ornate and notorious in Chicago. Cosmano, recovered from his wounds, was only one of thirty suspects, and no one was ever brought to trial for the murder.

Capone and Torrio, with a desperately efficient and growing organization, were no longer restricted by the limitations of Colosimo. They knew everyone in the underworld or in crooked politics who could be of any value to them. By 1921, with the police either quiescent or helpful, they were all set for the millions. Their beer vans rumbled through Chicago and their high-powered automobiles swept in deftly disconnected caravans between Canada and Chicago, and New York and Chicago. Money poured in as never before in all vice or crook history.

Competition at that time was slight. Silent, fast working and clear-headed young toughs of Chicago were in new found clover. The life-and-death angle of competition, which was later to take its terrific toll, was not in evidence then. The Capone-Torrio group were literally doing all the business they could handle. Other groups were, with less organization, taking any business they could swing in this new and deliriously profitable field. When a real personality like Dion O'Banion popped up and seemed to be everywhere with his stuff, the Capone outfit reached out, gave him a split, and took him in with them.

This outfit was soon doing as great a volume of business and with nearly as great a return as any single legitimate business in the city—and the city was a haven of big business interests. Furthermore, inasmuch as the business was illegal, with so much necessary rushing to and fro and with such huge sums involved, Torrio and his aids decided to take over a suburb. They looked over Stickney, then Burnham and finally settled like locusts on Cicero.

This town is only forty minutes from Chicago's center. Its fifty-five thousand people were mainly employed in five large industrial plants. They worked too hard to be curious or meddlesome.

Taking their time, winning confidence throughout the suburb, the bootleg organization slowly came into the town. With more money than it and eight surrounding towns had ever heard of, they proceeded with bribes, favors, jobs and allurements, to take over the elections, to own the town. It was accomplished.

Soon "The Tavern," "The Ship" and "The Stockade" were in operation in the vicinity, and they drew for both vice and gambling from the nearby Chicago population. Brewery after brewery was opened by the group; more and larger gambling and vice establishments constantly developed.

As early as 1926 the Capone outfit was operating on a gross basis of seventy million dollars a year. Those figures are not mine; they are from the records of Edwin A. Olsen, United States District Attorney, and a genuine prosecutor. He, within the scope of his possibilities, was a constant annoyance to Capone's organization.

But, mind you, business increased steadily. Al Capone, himself, who was not at all given to the habit of throwing figures about recklessly, estimated that thirty million dollars a year was spent for protection alone in Chicago. On this basis, the returns on gambling, vice and liquor-crime reached well over the one hundred million mark in the city.

When it is considered that \$200 would buy the death of any unimportant person and that a "grand" (a thousand-dollar bill) would procure the death of anyone, no matter how important, the figures had a real significance. As matters stood, the obituary column got off lightly.

This type of money had become more or less entwined in Chicago politics by about 1910. With the new opportunities of prohibition and the increase in the scope of thuggery due to these opportunities, this money power had become in most instances a deter-

mining factor in the elections.

Torrio made the original political contacts in Chicago under the guidance of Colosimo, but Capone reached a point in merged underworld and politics never dreamed of by his predecessors. Even as the death of Colosimo gave the Torrio-Capone outfit increased opportunity, so did the headlong flight of Torrio out of Chicago gangdom give Capone increased status and elbow room for his political ambitions.

Fourteen days after the death of O'Banion, Hymie Weiss, who succeeded O'Banion in the leadership of the North Side gang, pulled up with three of his killers alongside Torrio's car and opened fire. They raked the car, killed Torrio's chauffeur and a dog beside him on the seat and drove on. Torrio was unhurt but his hat had two bullet holes in it. It had long been said of him that he could hand it out but hated to take it. He proved that to be true.

Two days later Torrio and his wife stepped from their car, on a street directly behind their house, intending, because of fear, to cut through to their own back door. Fifty slugs sprayed them from sawed-off shotguns as a big car swept by. Three of the shots struck Torrio; they were said to be poisoned bullets prepared in garlic, and he was in the hospital a month. Meanwhile, his gang surrounded the institution. Torrio had had enough.

He knew that Hymie Weiss—who, before he himself was shot to pieces, was the most energetic dynamo of revenge Chicago gangland ever knew—

would never stop till he got him. Thinking of a way out, Torrio recalled that he was under sentence of one year in the federal court on a prohibition charge that he had appealed. He withdrew his bail and appeal, and was sent to the Waukegan Jail, where he knew he was safe. He set about adjusting his affairs for permanent flight from Chicago. To Capone he handed over the gang leadership with its profits, troubles and dangers.

Weiss kept him informed that there was no hurry. The North Side gang would wait patiently. Twice Torrio had escaped death by a hair's breadth, but they still felt that he owed them a funeral.

Six weeks before his sentence was completed, Torrio was released from jail and, with three cars filled with the pick of the Capone-Torrio outfit, sped to Buffalo. There he and the guards took a train for New York. He immediately went aboard a steamship bound for Italy, on which reservations had been obtained for him and four guards. He had nearly a million dollars. He then lived in the South of Italy like a feudal lord—but guarded.

Weiss, in a rage upon learning that Torrio had slipped away from him, devoted less time to business than to revenge. He went to lengths of sheer bravado never before approached until the successors of his own gang, long after the death of Weiss, were shot to death—a line of seven unresisting gangsters—in the North Side booze headquarters.

Three times during the brief leadership of Weiss, Capone barely averted death. Twice his car was

“picked away” from cars containing his own guards and swept by gunfire. Each time Capone’s clothes were pierced by slugs, but he remained uninjured.

Finally the indomitable Weiss, who had sworn to get Capone within a year after O’Banion’s death, took three cars full of his followers right into Cicero. Capone’s people, tipped off twenty minutes before the cavalcade arrived, were under cover. But it was too unexpected an invasion to find them ready for a major combat.

The machine gun caravan slowly moved about Cicero looking into every face to be observed, then swung back by Capone’s headquarters, “The Ship,” and raked it with machine gun bullets from top to bottom. Inside in his steel shuttered room, Capone listened to the shattering process. Four bystanders were injured.

I remember his enthusiasm about the type of gun that had made a wreck of his building front.

“That’s the gun!” he said; “it’s got it over a sawed off shotgun like the shotgun has it over an automatic. It shoots four hundred and fifty shots a minute. Put on a bigger drum and it will shoot well over a thousand. The trouble is they are hard to get. A cop don’t want to get hold of one because his shield number gets mixed up in the record of sale. Bank guards ought to be a good spot to get them from.”

In the period following this historic raid both Weiss and Capone kept in seclusion. When they moved they were surrounded by guards. Things were unusually “hot” with the gangs.

Weiss tried every possible means to learn of Capone's movements. Finally the chauffeur of Capone was captured, tortured for hours and shot to death. His silence regarding Capone's movements brought him death. Months later his body was found in a cistern in East Chicago.

Less than a week passed, and as Weiss, Schemer Drucci and one of their legal advisers were driving down Michigan Avenue in broad daylight, a car crashed into theirs and a shower of bullets smashed all the glass in the car. They were uninjured. All ran for shelter in the Standard Oil Building, firing as they ran.

At this time Capone sent word to Weiss that he was willing to talk peace. Weiss replied that if Capone would put the two men who had fired on him "on the spot," he would talk terms with him. To put the men on the spot meant that they would be sent to a definite place at a definite hour so that they could be killed off.

Capone's reply was that he would not do that to a yellow dog.

Again the war was on, but Weiss was not to participate in it long.

He had been an active influence in getting O'Banion to break with the Capone-Torrio organization. He had urged it long before circumstances made it necessary. Nor could Weiss ever understand the attitude of the Capone group when the break came. He contended that O'Banion had done more for them than they could ever do for O'Banion.

There was an element of jealousy from the beginning in the point of view of the Capone outfit regarding the North Side gang. O'Banion and his followers were young and in the main of good appearance. Their taste in cars inclined toward the foreign made types; they wore four-carat diamonds and were "the class." They took over the North Side trade in a chunk and, despite the irritation of the Capone mob, it became a settled policy, without conference, that Capone and Torrio had the South Side to the Indiana Line, except for such poaching as might be tolerated from the Polack Joe Saltis, the McErlane and O'Donnell beer running crews.

But there was a never-curbed hatred between these two main gangs. The death of O'Banion, followed by the vengeful example of Weiss, gave Chicago five years of gang strife such as no city in the world had ever known.

With the flight of Torrio, Capone turned his attention, supported by his political value, to the gambling monopoly of Chicago. William E. Dever, whose term as Mayor of Chicago terminated in 1927, was supplanted by William Hale Thompson. It meant things for Capone.

Dever had raided all types of vice locations, gambling halls and drinking resorts, and Thompson, who had twice previously served as Mayor of Chicago, made a deliberate campaign appeal to the underworld. He promised a wide-open town, and a month after his election all the elements that Dever had opposed were having high carnival. Gambling machines, con-

trolled by Capone, were placed even in drugstores. These machines, spewing quarters out at rare intervals, could be adjusted to make the player more and more foolish. At best the chances are thirty to one against the fellow bucking the machine. It was a new golden flood for the Capone forces.

Meanwhile, affairs in Chicago led to a political upheaval. In April 1928 resentment against bombings and election violence swept every Thompson candidate out of office.

With his Chicago activities somewhat hampered by the activity of the reform element, Capone, leaving his multiple interests in the hands of subordinates, took stock of the situation about the country. After a while he set off for Florida, for a rest. But Capone did not rest. He happened not only to be there but to be talking to the District Attorney of Miami at the precise moment when the seven gangsters of Bugs Moran's North Side gang were lined up and killed on St. Valentine's Day. It was the merest coincidence that he had stopped in at the District Attorney's office. Nothing could be more mere.

Florida—swept by floods, staggering from the effects of the collapsed land boom—needed about everything at the time Capone arrived there. Perhaps it needed some advice, and activities soon after his arrival indicate that the advice was forthcoming. Four hundred and fifteen slot machines, fresh from Chicago, were operating in Miami a week after his arrival. There was no interference or virtuous outcry. The word sped quickly.

In some way, or in the old way, the business leaders of Miami effected a truce with the reform elements thereabouts and scaled the lid into the sea.

The first break in the order of things as they were was the opening of the Hialeah Race Track, a runway dedicated to the improvement of the breed and the extension of sophistication generally. Oral betting was permitted. Of course, there was an element of decency in this matter for, at regular intervals, the sheriff came around to see that everything was okay. You could almost tell that the sheriff was coming because of the furious honking of his motor escort. By the time he arrived, you would be sure everything was okay. Within a very brief time, gambling halls of all sorts and sizes had received the signal of one closed eye and were operating on all cylinders.

The gambling was the signal to all racketeers. Within a few days wealthy folk from the East and North lifted an eyebrow at the sight of a convention of thugs, gangsters, racketeers and assorted bums. Soon a dog track—lushest of all grafts—was in operation with bets free and open. Miami packed up. Things looked so extremely good that Stribling and Sharkey put on their waltz before an audience, which was a miracle of contrasts.

During this hectic period in the pearl of the Southland, one Fatty Walsh, erstwhile bodyguard of the late Arnold Rothstein, exercised his prerogative of talking too loudly and too much and received a fatal bullet, apparently impulsively or casually fired into his body. Ed Wilson, gambler of New York and Chicago, was

accused of this crime and vanished, and within two days Jack Waller, former aid of Rothstein, had decided to leap to his death from the Clyde Line steamer *Shawnee*, just off the coast of Florida. All of this was news and education to hitherto conservative Miami. You can't have that kind of money without that kind of influx and those unhappy and fatal disagreements.

Capone not only enjoyed a very remunerative holiday but became a social favorite during his stay in Florida. Floridians and visiting notables whom he met expatiated upon his mild manner, his unusual and interesting point of view and his excellent qualities as a host.

These reactions were not amazing, for anyone whose work or business or thirst brought him into contact with the "big shots" among bootleggers. There seemed to be a general impression that Chicago gangsters were not people, but an amalgam of fiend, viper and gorilla. The fact is that they were in a business that was likely to make anything of anybody. Some of them had some rather good traits mixed with the characteristics required by a successful bootlegger.

Let us look into that matter a moment.

Suppose that a normal businessman of good standing and of unusual good nature became convinced that there was nothing despicable about supplying good liquor to people who wanted it. He discovers a source where such liquor can be obtained and goes about the matter of its transportation, delivery to customers, storing and general detail just as any

well balanced, capable and energetic businessman would do. He is not afraid of work; he has had many a "hard day at the office."

Well, to begin with, conditions are a bit changed. His old hours were approximately from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon. At the slightest intrusion in his office, theft, or damage to his property, every facility of the law was at his command. He was in no danger. His investments were sound and even when there was a drop in his favorite holdings he could stand the gaff and keep a stiff upper lip.

He leaves all that with his new job. Neither his life nor property is safe. His hours are frequently around the clock. And when he works so long he is not merely quietly figuring or examining blueprints. He's wondering if property of his valued at from \$25,000 to \$200,000 is going to get over roads without legal protection and with officials seeking either to confiscate the property or steal it for themselves.

He is depending, in the main, on crooks in his own employ to protect him. He may have lost two or three loads and the loss of this one may mean ruin. He has been double-crossed by officers who took his money and took his property too. He has no redress. He has been warned that he will be killed on sight. He suspects and hates four of his nearest aids, believing that the loss of the loads was due to their duplicity. Add to this the normal arduous detail of purchase, payment and transportation of materials, and what has become of your well-balanced, good-natured man? He's likely to take a shot at anybody.

It has been conclusively proven in my experience that no one can attain or maintain leadership unless he "has something." Those who knew Capone for years granted him qualities—a few—that would be acceptable in anyone. He had concentration and executive ability that many possessors of better trained minds might have envied. He was not petty. He was generous, foolishly so. He was intensely loyal. He had a good memory and was appreciative. He talked little, but when he uttered a few sounds you had heard something.

The rest of him is yours for a nickel.

So far as the pleasant impression he made upon people in Florida is concerned, people either liked him or wanted to kill him. Perhaps Mr. C. R. Allen, the owner of the estate he leased down there, would have been his best Florida witness. When Capone leased at a tremendous rental, the owners were going abroad. They did not know that A. L. Capone was none other than "Scarface Al" of Chicago. When they were on shipboard, a radio news dispatch announced that the famous Chicago gangster was in Florida.

The trip was ruined. It was assumed by the owners that they would come back to find the chandeliers shot up, the lawn full of casualties and the house stripped of everything of value. Cables were sent to the lawyers representing the owners. A party for fifty was in progress at the estate when the solicitors got there. They had a cocktail and stayed, diplomatically stating that they had just come over to be sure everything was satisfactory. They knew most of the people

at the party. They were respectable folk. Some were prominent!

When the owners returned three months later, Capone had gone to Chicago to answer a Federal indictment and Mrs. Capone had gone to Havana with friends for a few days.

The house was in perfect order and the cellar contained a very fine selection of liquors. The glass and silver service had been doubled to meet the requirements of the large parties. A check covering every possible item had been left with the request that the additional glass and silverware be accepted for future convenience. The owners were flabbergasted.

A week went by and there came a telephone bill for \$780 for two calls made to Chicago. Capone, it appears, was a man of few words except when talking on the telephone to Chicago. Still, the owners of the estate, considering everything, felt that the entire transaction was satisfactory.

Four or five days later Mrs. Capone arrived, slim, well mannered and attractive.

"My husband wired me about a telephone charge," she explained. "We had forgotten it." She tendered a thousand dollar bill.

Mrs. Allen took the bill and explained that she would give Mrs. Capone a check for the difference, \$220.

Mrs. Capone, on her way out, waved a small hand deprecatingly.

"Please, don't mind," she said. "It will just make matters right. I forgot to tell you that we broke a

small clock upstairs.”

Postscript: The Downfall of Al Capone (as told by the FBI)

The FBI's investigation Al Capone arose from his reluctance to appear before a federal grand jury on March 12, 1929 in response to a subpoena. On March 11, his lawyers formally filed for postponement of his appearance, submitting a physician's affidavit dated March 5, which attested that Capone had been suffering from bronchial pneumonia in Miami, had been confined to bed from January 13 to February 23, and that it would be dangerous to Capone's health to travel to Chicago. His appearance date before the grand jury was reset for March 20.

On request of the U.S. Attorney's Office, FBI agents obtained statements to the effect that Capone had attended racetracks in the Miami area, that he had made a plane trip to the Bimini and a cruise to Nassau [both in the Bahamas], that he had been interviewed at the office of the Dade County Solicitor, and that he had appeared in good health on each of those occasions.

Capone appeared before the federal grand jury in Chicago on March 20, 1929, and completed his testimony on March 27. As he left the courtroom, he was arrested by agents for contempt of court, an offense for which the penalty could be one year in prison and a \$1,000 fine. He posted \$5,000 bond and was released.

On May 17, 1929, Capone and his bodyguard were

arrested in Philadelphia for carrying concealed deadly weapons. Within sixteen hours they had been sentenced to terms of one year each. Capone served his time and was released in nine months for good behavior on March 17, 1930.

On February 28, 1931, he was found guilty in federal court on the contempt of court charge and was sentenced to six months in Cook County Jail. His appeal on that charge was subsequently dismissed.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Treasury Department had been developing evidence on tax evasion charges—in addition to Al Capone, his brother Ralph “Bottles” Capone, Jake “Greasy Thumb” Guzik, Frank Nitti, and other mobsters were subjects of tax evasion charges.

On June 16, 1931, Capone pled guilty to tax evasion and prohibition charges. He then boasted to the press that he had struck a deal for a two-and-a-half year sentence, but the presiding judge informed him he, the judge, was not bound by any deal. Capone then changed his plea to not guilty.

On October 18, 1931, Capone was convicted after trial and on November 24 was sentenced to eleven years in federal prison, fined \$50,000 and charged \$7,692 for court costs, in addition to \$215,000 plus interest due on back taxes. The six-month contempt of court sentence was to be served concurrently.

While awaiting the results of appeals, Capone was confined to the Cook County Jail. Upon denial of appeals, he entered the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta, serving his sentence there and at Alcatraz.

On November 16, 1939, Al Capone was released after having served seven years, six months and fifteen days, and having paid all fines and back taxes.

Suffering from paresis [partial paralysis] derived from syphilis, he had deteriorated greatly during his confinement. Immediately on release he entered a Baltimore hospital for brain treatment and then went on to his Florida home, an estate on Palm Island in Biscayne Bay near Miami, which he had purchased in 1928.

Following his release, he never publicly returned to Chicago. He had become mentally incapable of returning to gangland politics. In 1946 his physician and a Baltimore psychiatrist, after examination, both concluded Capone then had the mentality of a 12-year-old child. Capone resided on Palm Island with his wife and immediate family, in a secluded atmosphere, until his death due to a stroke and pneumonia on January 25, 1947.

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Alphonse “Al” Capone was the tough and scar-faced immigrant boy who was the undisputed boss of Chicago by the time he was 30, controlling a bandit gang that raked in \$100 million a year from bootlegging, gambling, prostitution and protection money. In his era—roughly 1925 to 1931—there were 418 gang killing in Chicago and he himself traveled through town in an armor-plated limousine that weighed seven tons.

Originally published in 1929 in the author’s larger “Rattling the Cup on Chicago Crime,” this paperback edition explores Capone’s notorious domination of organized crime in Chicago in the 1920s.

Author Edward D. Sullivan (1888–1938), who studied law under private tutors, was a feature writer for the New York Herald Tribune and a columnist for the New York Post. Other works include “Chicago Surrenders” and “Benedict Arnold: Military Racketeer.”

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